

the gory truth of it by goodmourningdove

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Summary:

You wouldn't think that there's a lot of time for inner reflection when you're bleeding out, but there is. In fact, there's little else to do after you've given up on holding your own insides inside but tell yourself that if you live, you'll actually live this time and that the echoed chanting of "clown, clown, clown, clown" had better not be the last thing you ever hear.

After narrowly avoiding death, Eddie learns that the hardest promises to keep are the ones you make to yourself. An un-tragedy in three acts.

the gory truth of it

Author's Note:

general sort of tw/cw for descriptions of injury, mentions of canon suicide, and emetophobia

The thing they don't tell you about near death experiences is that, when you're really deep in, when you're tightrope-walking heel-toe-heel-toe that hair thin line between "near" and "actual," you make a lot of promises. There's the typical, "please, god, let me live" variety, the "I promise to be a better man" type. Just pitching your life to whatever powers may be (at that point, you're generally hoping that they *be*) and praying something takes pity on you over it. Those promises come first. But after that, if you're still holding on after the pleading and the begging and the bargaining, you start making promises to yourself and yourself alone.

You're all you've got, there in the end; if there's anytime to be selfish it's when you can feel time, and your own blood, slipping through your fingers. When you get lightheaded, just before that true, last "here I go" feeling, not unfamiliar from a lifetime of dizzy spells but stronger and deeper than ever before, as what is still (for now) you gears up for the big final faint, that's when it happens.

That's when it comes out, the vows, that if you somehow get through this you will grasp for that blessed second chance with both hands, you'll grip it so tight your fingernails crack and your joints ache, and you won't ever let go. You'll live for yourself for once, and stop tying yourself down to something that's, metaphorically, hurt and dying. You get a lot of perspective on stuff like that when you're literally hurt and dying.

You wouldn't think there's a lot of time for inner reflection when you're bleeding out on a filthy floor, cold and clammy from both the loss of blood and the general musk of a cistern, laying back, just kicking it to the soundtrack of the people you love most in the world bullying a clown to death. But there is. In fact, there's little else to do after you've given up on holding your own insides inside but tell yourself that if you live, you'll actually *live* this time and that the

echoed chanting of “clown, clown, clown, clown” had better fucking not be the last thing you ever hear.

Eddie died.

Eddie died three times. Once in the ambulance and twice on the operating table.

It didn't stick.

He'd almost died a fourth time, of a fucking heart attack, after his attending physician informed him about his close calls not even an hour after waking up. This hospital, he had decided, was going to get a *nasty* review as soon as he got his phone back on him. As soon as he could think clearly and everything didn't hurt so fucking bad.

The days after his “little accident” passed in a blur of painkillers, bandages, and sporadic tears. Some from himself, more from his friends and from Myra over the phone, and many, overwhelmingly, from Richie, who (and this may just be as a result of his clown-fucked memory) he could previously count on one hand the number of times he'd seen cry. Now, however, from the time Eddie came to, he'd been hard pressed to spend an hour with Richie that didn't, at least once, end with him crying. And he spent a lot of hours with Richie those days in the hospital. Richie set up camp in that little plastic chair next to Eddie's hospital bed, sitting silent vigil, and then, later, not-so-silent vigil, morning, noon, and night for days on end.

And then, just like that, he was gone. “Dates in Reno,” he had said, although, when Eddie googled his tour, they'd been cancelled. His next shows were in Laughlin, which was a fucking *stretch*. Eddie would have liked to have ragged on him about this, about still lying to show off at forty years old (as much as “*shows in Reno*” was showing off) but Richie was now a dust cloud pointed towards Nevada and Eddie had put very strict restrictions on his own unsupervised phone use until his doctor toned down the cocktail of painkillers he was on.

So, his days shifted from being blurry with Richie to being blurry sans Richie and before he really knew what was happening, he was

sat in the passenger seat of Mike's truck with a bottle of painkillers (with which he was to be very careful), a cane (because you just don't survive taking a clown claw through your midsection without at least some of your shit getting forever fucked), and a plane ticket home.

He still wasn't good to drive and the jury was still out on whether or not he ever would be again. His doctor at the hospital had given him a referral to a physical therapist back in New York, and Eddie spent most of the flight mentally penciling in new appointments amongst his likely majorly fucked schedule.

He found himself in the lobby of his apartment building—waiting for the elevator and frustrated the stairs weren't an option—and realized that he barely even knew how he got there.

Well, he knew how he got there, obviously. He never would have left the hospital if he had any suspicion that there was something wrong with his memory. And, while he'd been skewered and drained of a near-unsurvivable quantity of blood, he'd somehow made it out of Neibolt without a concussion. Which was some small comfort amidst the general terror over what was going on with the rest of his body. But, still, it felt like he was on a conveyor belt hauling him ever forward while everything just sort of happened to and around him until he was promptly mailed flat-rate right back into his old life, wrapped up nice and neat. If that made any sense. He'd been very cautious with the painkillers but that metaphor got away from him there.

He was brought out of his pseudo-stupor by the dinging of the elevator reaching the ground floor and sliding open to him. He just stood there, cane in one hand and roller suitcase in the other, staring into the open elevator as it waited for him to board and push the button sending him upwards toward what was and has been his life. Derry was a pause on that. A longer than anticipated and painful pause, but, still, only a pause. Life-altering, definitely, but not necessarily life-changing. He stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for his floor.

The thing they don't tell you about the promises you make to yourself? They are very, very hard to keep.

He'd been home for a week and was pretty sure he'd got himself back into the swing of things. With *alterations* of course, like the dent in his torso (which Richie had christened "The Cupholder," during one of those pleasantly blurry hospital days), and the cane, and the fact that he had *friends now* (again?).

He could tell that last one was worrying Myra. He knew by the way she would look at him from across the living room, or the dining table, or their bed (the two or three nights a week they actually shared one; the counselor, no, not the first one, but the second one, had said it was healthy, actually), as he tapped away on his phone to chime in to the group chat Mike had set them all up with, or to text back Richie or any of the others who messaged him personally.

The injury had worried Myra too, of course, that was to be expected. But, even with his half-baked excuse as to what almost got him killed (horrible, freak accident with a house demolition and flying debris, massive OSHA violation; he knew she didn't believe him but he also knew she wouldn't say anything about it), it was still the sudden appearance of friends that seemed to perplex her the most.

"Eddie, honey," she said, on his eighth day back home. She sat across from him at their cute, little breakfast nook in their cute, little kitchen, in their cute, not-so-little apartment in not-little-at-all New York City, a coffee in front of her (decaf, black, four sugars) and half an orange in front of him (grapefruit would have been preferred, but he'd never been one to fuck around with medication reactions). "Who are you texting?" she asked, benignly.

"Hm?" he jumped in his seat, looking up at her, fingers bumping and prematurely sending out his response chastising (bitching at) Richie for still being up when it's four in the morning in Los Angeles. "Oh, just some old friends," he started to explain, feeling strangely guilty, like he'd been caught doing something he wasn't supposed to be doing. Fucking ridiculous. "From growing up. We all reconnected when I went home," he said, then added, "For Stanley's funeral." That was the excuse they had all agreed on, quarter-truth as it may be. In any case, "had to take off out of nowhere to reenact *The Big Chill* " was much easier to swallow than "had to follow through with a childhood promise to re-kill a space clown." He also wasn't sure if

Myra believed this part of it either, but, again, knew she wouldn't bring it up.

"Right, of course. I'd forgotten," she said, sounding like she hadn't forgotten at all.

He typed out the rest of his message to Richie in a second text and sent it off, before setting his phone on the table, face-down, and looking up at his wife, only to find her gazing downward into her coffee cup.

"Myra? You alright?" She raised her head back up.

"Oh, sorry. I'm just a little tired, I think. I might be coming down with a cold," she said. "Don't forget to take your vitamin C supplement, I don't want you to catch it." He nodded at her and turned his attention back to his breakfast, carefully removing the rest of the orange peel, separating it into slices.

"I love you," softly, Myra said, watching him from across the table. He glanced back up to her.

"I love you too, sweetheart." The term of endearment was more of a habit than anything at this point, but it seemed to appease her, relief painted across her features.

He smiled at her. She smiled back.

His phone buzzed, and he looked away to pick it back up.

"Hey, Kaspbrak." Eddie looked up from his computer to the man standing stiffly in the door of his office, hands in his pockets.

"Yeah?" He saved the spreadsheet he'd been fixing three times before minimizing the window and looking back up at Craig Green, fellow risk analyst and vague superior to himself. A few months ago, Eddie would have said they were friends, until he remembered what that word actually meant. Now he was just someone Eddie happened to see a lot.

"The missus and I were talking," Craig started. He was the type of

guy who said things like “the missus” and always called people by their last names like he’d never quite got over playing football in high school. Eddie hated it. Growing up, a call of his last name was generally followed by a rock at his head, and he’d never been one for team sports. Barring six notable exceptions, he’d never managed well when working with others. Even then, as kids, his friends had almost never wasted their time playing team sports when all games ended with Richie and Eddie tackling each other into the grass, dirt, or even, occasionally, the asphalt. A complete game of kickball just wasn’t realistic when Bill and Mike had to drop everything to drag Eddie away from trying to shove fistfulls of grass in Richie’s mouth as Beverly cheered them on, while Stan wandered off with his binoculars and Ben looked on, worried. Still fun, of course, if unusual. Which was on-brand for the seven of them.

Eddie’s sudden, warm memories of grass stains and skinned knees was interrupted when Craig continued:

“We were thinking, it’s been a while since we did a double-date night. Grace’s been wanting to catch back up with Myra and we haven’t all got together since you, since you,” Eddie guessed that Craig didn’t know how to end that sentence in any way other than “almost fucking died” and Eddie didn’t want to get into it, so he cut him off.

“Right, yeah, it’s been a while,” he said. “I’ll talk to Myra about it. I’ll, um, we’ll let you know.” The pronoun felt weird in his mouth. He and Myra had been a “we” for well over a decade, and he’d referred to them as such hundreds, if not thousands, of times. It felt unfamiliar now and his stomach churned at it. It was doing that a lot lately. (Indigestion, maybe? Acid reflux? He’d never had too much trouble with heartburn, healthy eating assured that, but it could be something else, like, if the, the, the, IT injured his stomach on the way through. His doctor told him that nothing had happened to his stomach, but that didn’t mean he was *right*. A doctor, sure, but a doctor at *Derry General*, plus, doctors make mistakes all the time, they get complacent in their knowledge and Eddie had never been complacent in any, any, any—)

Craig chatted at him for a few more minutes, expertly missing or ignoring all hints Eddie sent his way about wanting to get back to

work. It came to a blessed end, eventually, but not until Craig suggested that Eddie join his *fucking handball league* and Eddie had to gesture with his head to his cane, leaning up against the side of his desk. Things got (more) uncomfortable at that point until Craig finally fucked off back to his own office, reminding Eddie about the potential double date *again* , before leaving.

He ran a few more equations through his spreadsheet, giving less and less of a shit about this merger he was helping facilitate with every key he pressed. He'd been just about to say "fuck it" and take lunch at 10:30 when his cellphone (which he, until recently, had always kept turned off and inside his briefcase during the workday) buzzed from its spot on his desk, alerting him to a call. He picked up,

"Richie?"

"Eds! Hey, what's up?"

"What's up? You called me." Eddie rolled his chair across the easy-scoot plastic rug under his desk, grabbing his cane and rising to shut the door to his office. "The fuck are you doing up?" he asked. "It's, like, 7:30 there, isn't it?"

"Au contraire, mon petit ami," Richie said, then coughed. "Um, I mean, I'm in an airport, so time doesn't exist for me anymore. I just drank a Bloody Mary with a Cinnabon, I am not bound to the hands of the clock."

"Christ, what a heinous combination, Rich, that'd legitimately taste like vomit." He made his way back into his desk chair, sitting down and idly twisting it back and forth as he spoke.

"Breakfast of champions, actually. It's got all the food groups: vegetables, vodka, icing that's the exact consistency of jizz."

"Oh, gross, knock it off."

"It's protein, Eds, grow up."

"It's pure sugar."

"I was talking about—"

"I know what you were talking about and I'm not discussing," even though the door to his office was closed, he lowered his voice to a whisper, " *semen* with you. I'm at work."

"Oh, yuck, it sounds all Law-and-Order-y when you call it that. Jizz is something you can joke about being on a cinnamon roll, semen is what you find on, like, a corpse."

"And a real great conversation topic for an airport. Where are you, LAX?"

"Nah, ATL, baby. Layover," he explained. "I, um, kind of wish it was longer, I thought I might try and give Patricia a visit one of these days. Check in, y'know?"

"Yeah, I know." They fall quiet, wordlessly slipping into a moment of silence for Stan. They hadn't talked about the letters, not in detail, not to each other. Eddie couldn't stop reading his over and over, like if he went through it enough times he'd be able to actually make sense of it outside of it being a collection of vaguely comforting words that did little else than make him sad and nauseous. "Anyway, layover? Where're you headed? Still on tour?" He could hear Richie slap his forehead on the other end of the line.

"Right, shit, that's why I called. Yeah, I'm actually, I got shows in New York this weekend."

"Oh, shit, really?"

"Yeah, man, if you'd follow me back on Twitter you'd already know, but, um. If you wanna, I can comp you some tickets if you and the, uh, the wifey want to come. And," he added, "I'm there for a few days, so maybe we can get drinks or something. Show me all the cool places credit reporters hang out."

"That's not my job. That's not even a job." Eddie was fiddling on his computer, dragging the cursor into selection boxes across the desktop, grinning as he fell into the easy pattern of bickering with Richie.

"Sure, sure, talk down to all those hard working credit reporters out

there, crunching the numbers you're too good to crunch."

"Credit reporters are *programs* , it's not something that people do."

"Dehumanizing them too? You're one heartless motherfucker, Kaspbrak." Richie calling him by his surname never had the same effect as other people doing it, if only because anytime Eddie was getting rocks thrown at him, Richie was usually getting rocks thrown at himself too. Eddie almost liked it, as much as he almost liked a lot of the more annoying things about Richie. Richie cackled at his own joke, pleased with himself and making Eddie very happy that Richie couldn't see him smiling.

"But, um," Richie said, once he got his self-induced laughter under control, "you'll try to come?" Richie was a loudmouth at the best of times, so Eddie was weirded out over just how small his voice sounded. After only a moment's hesitation, he answered:

"Yeah, man, of course. I'll have to, I mean, I'll ask Myra. I don't think she'd want to come but—"

"It's fine if you can't make it. I'm not gonna cry if you don't show up."

"But," he continued, "I'll be there."

"Wait, really?"

"Yeah, Richie, I'll be there."

Myra, it turned out, wanted to come to the show.

Of course she wanted to go with him, she had said. She wanted a chance to meet one of Eddie's "new friends."

"Old friend," he corrected her and she'd nodded.

"Right, of course," she'd said, and suggested that maybe his dear, old friend could get tickets for the Greens as well, it had been so long since we'd all got together, hadn't it?

Richie was more than happy to hand over the tickets and Eddie hated it. He hated that he'd even asked Myra, but he felt like he should, for the sake of transparency, because he'd done a pretty shitbag job of being a husband lately, with all the "running off out of nowhere to meet with friends he'd never mentioned before" and the "coming home with two new holes in his body."

And maybe it was unfair, but he hated that too, how worried she would get, even (and maybe even especially) when it was actually warranted. And maybe it was unfair, but he hated sitting in the theater, squeezed between Myra and a stranger (who was *exactly* the kind of person he would have expected to be at one of Richie's shows) so she could sit next to and catch up with Grace Green. And maybe it was unfair, but he hated Richie's stupid show, watching him up on stage, carefully charismatic and phony as hell, easing through jokes Eddie knew he hadn't written.

Although he couldn't quite put his finger on it, or track down the specifics, Eddie couldn't help but feel that enough of his life had been un-fucking-fair that he could be a little unfair right back. Even if it was, well, unfair.

Eddie told Richie what he'd thought about the show, afterwards, after the Greens had peeled off to collect their kids from the sitter and he made his way to the stage door, not checking if Myra was following him or not. He stood back and waited for the smattering of fans to fuck off before going up to Richie and laying into him, giving his scathing, but detailed, impromptu review while Richie led him back inside into the greenroom.

"Fuck, Eds, don't sugar coat it or anything," Richie said, feigned offense like a patchy layer of spackling over what Eddie could only call exhaustion.

"It's just— it's just fake as fuck, man," Eddie said. "I mean, you've never been funny, but you were always *you* at least." Richie raised his eyebrows at him, visibly tired, but smirking.

"Hell yeah, I knew you'd have notes. Tell it to me straight, Eddie, baby," he said and threw open his arms. He held them open, looking at Eddie (who had roughly fifty different things on his mind at all

times, but especially now, standing in front of Richie like it was something they just got to *do* now) expectantly, tired smile still stretched across his face.

“What?” Eddie asked. Richie huffed, and waved his arms.

“I’m trying to initiate a hug, dipshit, it’s something friends do when they haven’t seen each other for weeks.”

“Oh. Well.” Eddie rolled his eyes and stepped into Richie’s arms, wrapping his own arms around him as he went. Eddie felt Richie tentatively place his arms around Eddie’s back, avoiding the still painful wound, landing with one arm around his lower waist and his other hand cradling the back of his head, gentle in a way he didn’t know Richie could be. It was fucking *weird*.

Eddie tightened his grip around Richie’s back, urging him to hug like he fucking *meant it*. Richie took the hint and squeezed harder before pulling back to look at him.

“You’d think you missed me or something.”

“Shut up.”

“Eddie, honey?” Eddie swung around at the sound of Myra’s voice, finding her peeking into the greenroom. “The, um, stage manager said, said that you...” she trailed off. Richie pulled his arms off of Eddie and back to his sides, like Eddie was a hot stovetop and Richie was some dumbass kid who just had to touch things. Which.

“I’m right here, Myra,” he said, and then tacked on, “sweetie.”

“I got worried,” she said, “you ran off so fast, and you know moving too quick can strain your back and you trip so easily with the, with the cane, and the doctor said—”

“I know what the doctor said. I was there,” Eddie said. Again, she was worried and he hated it. He loved her, he did, he did, but he hated it.

Richie cleared his throat behind Eddie, drawing attention to himself. He raised a hand in a stiff, but still sort of goofy (everything was

always kind of goofy when ran through the filter of his gangly body, it was— it was *something*) gesture.

“Hey,” he greeted, crossing the room with his arm outstretched for a handshake Myra hesitated to accept. “Myra Kaspbrak, I presume,” he said, dusting off the British Guy voice, which had only grown more van Dyke-esque with age. Voice aside, Richie introduced himself to her like a normal fucking adult. “Richard Tozier. Eddie and me, we, uh, we grew up together. Glad to finally meet you, Mrs. K, Eds has told me so much.”

It was bullshit. Of course. It was all bullshit. Bullshit because Eddie knew he’d barely breathed a word about Myra to Richie, outside of her general existence as his wife. Beyond that, it was bullshit that Richie could say otherwise and still have it come off as genuine.

“Just,” Myra stuttered, “just Myra is fine.”

“Oh, okay,” Richie said, dropping her hand. “No problem.” Eddie knew, he *knew* there would be no stopping Richie continuing to call her Mrs. K. Eddie had already heard Richie’s “tight two” on how Eddie’s wife was a “carbon copy” of his mother after, reluctantly, showing off his wedding photos at the Chinese restaurant that first night back in Derry.

“Fucking shit,” Richie had said, drunk already from handlessly downing shots in a way that made Eddie’s hands itch, presumably out of an urge to strangle. “You know you’re supposed to be, like, fuckin’ happy when you get married, right? Like you knew that? You look like you just watched your dog get blue-needed and you had food poisoning.”

“That’s enough, Rich,” Eddie said, trying and failing to focus on the plate of orange chicken in front of him. Richie either didn’t hear him, or, more believably, didn’t give a shit, and continued:

“No, really, look.” He had already taken Eddie’s phone out of his hand, and now shoved it back in his face, pointing. “Look at your face, you look like you gave your vows mid pants-shitting.”

Luckily (?), shit broke real bad with the fortune cookie incident right

after that, so Eddie didn't have a chance to fight with Richie over his "brilliant observations."

But, now, months later, watching Richie interact so cordially with Myra (which was un-fucking-settling, like, yeah, there was a decades-spanning gap he couldn't account for in there, but he'd never, in his *life* , seen Richie do anything that could be called "cordial," it was uncanny), drove him up a fucking wall. Not that he wanted Richie to be rude to his wife or anything, but. But. But.

But what?

But *what*?

He didn't know. Or, he didn't think he knew. After everything with the Derry "reunion," it had become pretty safe to say that Eddie had no idea what he did or didn't know, and, like seemingly everything these days, it drove him up a fucking wall.

All he knew was that watching them interact was, was, *uncanny* . It just plain felt wrong to look at, like completely different zones of his life colliding against his will and better judgement. Some "never the twain shall meet" type shit or something, like Richie and Myra were supposed to exist on separate planes. It just felt incorrect.

"Sweetheart," Eddie said, drawing both Myra and Richie's attention back to him. "Rich and I were going to go out, catch up a bit. You alright to drive back by yourself?" She'd driven them there. Eddie's physical therapist, real mensch that he was (outside of costing a fucking fortune), had told him that, while the cane might be a permanent fixture, his chances of driving again were high. That did mean that, for the time being, Eddie relied pretty heavily on ride shares and Myra carting him around in the Cadillac that Mike was kind enough to drive down to New York and deliver to Eddie, fucked up passenger door and all. Public transport was an option, but the MTA was a petri dish at the best of times and if he didn't want to put himself through a chemical shower before he even entered his apartment, he wouldn't bother with it.

Myra, whose face revealed emotions so plainly and so clearly that she might as well have spoken them aloud, looked disappointed, but said:

“Oh, right. Yes, yes, that’s fine, Eddie-bear,” she slid around Richie to kiss Eddie on the cheek. “Have fun with your friend. Let me know when you get home.”

“Don’t wait up,” Eddie said, almost calling after her as she left the room to make sure she heard. She walked out the door without turning around, the door shutting behind her.

“Whelp,” Richie said, after a few seconds of silence. “Where to, Eddie-bear?”

Richie, it had turned out, knew more bars in Manhattan than Eddie did. Significantly more. Richie told him that was both a “tragedy” and “stupid” since he wasn’t even the one who “fucking lives here, Eds, that the hell?”

Richie took it upon himself to remedy this and Eddie could only assume it was out of the psychosexual thrill Richie must have got out of forcing chaos into the lives of otherwise decent people.

Eddie had said this to him during their walk (Richie had said it wasn’t far, but it felt pretty fucking far and his back twinged from it) from bar two to three. Something about the chuckle Richie gave in response made Eddie’s stomach burn.

“Only yours,” Richie said, glancing back at him. “I’m righting a wrong here. This next place is really sweet.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. How do you know so many places around here? You said you never lived here, right?”

“Nope, my heart belongs jointly to LA and Chicago, and I’ve always been faithful to our threesome,” he joked, before continuing. “But, uh, nah, I’ve never lived here. But, I’m here a lot for shows and I had an, um, ex who used to live in Tribeca, so I know my way around, I know the *cool* places.”

“Pfft, the ‘cool places?’”

“Yes or no, were the places I just took you cool as shit or not?” Eddie didn’t know if there was an objective answer to that. Eddie didn’t

know what was “cool” or not, never had, and kind of doubted Richie did either. But he was enjoying himself.

“Also, Tribeca? She had to be rich as *shit*,” Eddie said, nudging at Richie’s shoulder with his as they made their way down the sidewalk. Richie didn’t shove back, but chuckled and said, “Yeah, man.”

The next bar had been pretty nice, with lots of dark wood and cozy lighting, busy but not loud. Lively, but he could still hear Richie when he leaned in to talk to him in the corner booth they’d snagged.

“How’s the tour going?”

“How’s it going? You told me it sucked, man. Did you forget already?”

“No, I mean, I have, like, taste, but what about your *audience* audience.”

“Well,” he said, laughing, “after my little—my manager keeps calling it a fucking ‘hiccup,’ it’s hilarious—in Chicago, and then falling off face of the planet for like a month, that all drummed up a lot of “intrigue” so it’s actually gone way smoother than I thought. Super weird,” he explained. “Although, I think honestly people are just jumping at the bit to see if I freak out again.” He shrugged. “We might try and swing back around and do Chicago again. The Chicago Theatre’s still pissed at me, I’m super not ‘welcomed back,’ but the Thalia might make a deal with me for a way smaller crowd. Which, like, take what you can get, right?”

Eddie had been just about to say something to that, although he wasn’t sure exactly what (Intrigue? Was that all? Did Richie *think* he was going to have another freak out? There had to be something to work with here, come on, Kaspbrak, get your shit together), when he was interrupted by someone coming up to their table.

“Richard fucking Tozier, is that you?” Both Eddie and Richie looked up at the man now standing before them, his arms stretched out. Eddie had just been about to ask, “yeah, man, what of it?” when Richie responded.

“Oh, shit! Chris? What the fuck is up? What are you doing here?”

“What am I doing here? I live here, bitch.”

“No way, I heard you moved to Boston?”

“I did! But you know there’s no keeping me out of New York Shitty for long,” Chris (apparently) said, and Eddie felt weird over it. Who was this guy? At risk of sounding like a needy toddler, this was Richie-and-Eddie time and this guy was really harshing on that motherfucking *vibe* .

The Chris guy, Eddie thought, admittedly bitchily, was real fucking annoying. Eddie watched Chris look him up and down, smirking, which made Eddie’s skin feel like crawling right off his body.

“Wow, Rich, this your new—” Chris had said, until Richie cut him off.

“No, nope,” Richie said. “He’s an old friend. We grew up together.” Richie then gestures between them, “Chris this is Eddie, Eddie this is Chris,” he introduced. “Whelp, Chris, it was super cool to see you, but we were kind of, y’know?” Richie was obviously dropping some kind of hint, but Eddie, and this annoyed him, didn’t know what it was, exactly (it was a hint to leave, obviously, but there was something else there that Eddie didn’t get and it made him uncomfortable which pissed him right off).

Chris, taking the hint, *whatever it was* , nodded and wished them a good evening before taking off back towards the bar.

Eddie had asked, not long after, what that was all about. He watched as Richie got kind of weird, kind of twitchy at his spot across the table.

“That was,” he said, and paused, frowning, “not how I wanted to do this.” Eddie didn’t know what that meant, so he just looked up at him, waiting for Richie to continue. Richie sighed.

“That,” he began again, “was the, uh, was the ex I was telling you about. He showed me this place, *god*, years ago? Fuck, I heard he moved to Boston so I didn’t expect to, like, *see* him, let alone have

him come up to us. Right? I mean, you'd think once you leave New York, that's, like, a *for good* kind of decision, right?"

Richie was doing that thing. He was doing that thing he does when he was nervous and just kept talking, and talking, and talking like he hoped the person he was talking at would walk away, or change the subject, or just forget what they'd originally been talking about. But that shit didn't work on Eddie and it hadn't in a real long time. He may have forgotten him for decades, but dealing with Richie's bullshit was in his blood, in his bones, he had muscle memory in annoyance management. Like riding a bike, there was no erasing this hyper-specific skill set.

"You," Eddie started, unsure where he was going but going all the same. It was successful in its ultimate goal: getting Richie to shut the fuck up.

"Me?" Richie asked, pointing at himself.

"You're," Eddie started again, he was really going to get somewhere with this, given some time to think, but Richie had never been generous in that.

"I'm?" Richie said back to him, like a game. Eddie glared at him. Richie grinned back. He ran a hand through his hair, smile waning. "Gay?" he asked. "You asking if I'm gay, Eds?"

"You telling me that you're gay, Rich?" Eddie watched as Richie brought a finger to his own nose, tapping.

"Ding, ding, ding," he chimed, "survey says, top answer," he rambled on, rapping his hands against the table. "Oh, there's a joke in there somewhere, top answer, I gotta find it."

"A bad joke within the already terrible joke?"

"I've got a reputation to maintain." Richie kept tapping his hands against the table, and Eddie reached out to still them.

"Well. I'm glad you told me. Trusted me to tell me," he said, because he'd heard that's what you say. That's what he would like to hear, he thought, were he the one doing this (although he wasn't, and

wouldn't, but *if*). Richie snorted at him and took a drink.

"Uh, you're welcome? Thank you? I never know how to do this part of it, like, it's uncomfortable no matter what." Never? How many people had he told? This, and Eddie didn't know why, was suddenly very important.

"How many people know?" Eddie asked, curiosity burning a hole in his stomach (it would be a miracle, he thought, if he ended this night without an ulcer). It was unfair, he knew, but he had trouble conceiving of there being anything about Richie that other people knew, but he didn't.

"Uh," Richie said, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling in apparent thought. "Any exes, obviously, that comes with the territory. My manager, but that's really only because we used to fuck—"

"You fuck your manager?"

"Fuck *ed* . Past tense. It's been years. And if you want to get specific, technically he fucked me." Eddie didn't want to get specific. Richie winked at him, and Eddie hands itched.

"Christ, Richie, come on."

"Hey, you asked."

"Did I?"

"Anyway," Richie went on, "then my parents, which went great by the way. Bev knows but I don't know if I even ever actually told her, and, um, Stan knew."

"Stan knew?"

"Told him first, actually," Richie said, smiling that sad sort of smile that came with discussing Stanley.

"You didn't tell me?" Unfair, Eddie knew, but here he was.

"I'm sorry, what? I'm telling you now."

“Yeah, *now* , but you told Stan, what, in high school?” Unfair, again, but he couldn’t help it.

“Right, okay, are you making *my* coming out about *you* ? Who are you, my mother?” Richie laughed, dry. “She said almost the exact same thing, actually,” he heightened his voice into what ended up being a surprisingly really good impression of Maggie Tozier, “*“ I just don’t understand why you took so long to tell me . What did I do? Did I make you think you couldn’t trust me ? Richard, tell me.”*” Eddie would be impressed if he weren’t so annoyed.

“That’s not—I’m not—that’s not what I’m trying to do.” He just wanted (unfair, unfair) an explanation, even though he knew he wasn’t owed one. “Shit, Rich, I’m just— I didn’t— I’m sorry I—” Even if he knew that he wanted to say (he didn’t), he couldn’t get words to go into any sort of order. Richie, watching Eddie fidget across the table, cut off his rambling:

“Okay, shit, I believe you, cool your jets.” It was his turn, then, to reach across the table and still Eddie’s hands. Eddie looked down at their hands, then back up at Richie.

“Jets cooled,” Eddie sighed. “Let’s just—can we—let’s—drinks?” Richie laughed at Eddie’s spluttering.

“As you wish, Spaghetti Man, let’s drinks.”

Eddie was bound and determined to not have this ruin the mood of their night, mentally hoisting himself up by the collar and pushing himself against a locker in the high school hallway of his mind, warning himself about making it feel awkward.

He’d succeeded, more or less, although he wasn’t sure how much of it was due to his own social prowess and more that Richie was just a difficult person to feel uncomfortable around. There was something inherently likeable about the man, between his shit jokes, shit style, and just general... shittiness. Despite all that, Eddie had realized pretty early on in their friendship that, while there probably was a list of things Richie could do to make Eddie want nothing to do with him anymore, he honestly didn’t know what those things might be.

At two o'clock in the morning, Eddie was sat on the sidewalk outside a Duane Reade, head between his knees and maintaining careful eye contact with the pavement, all the while focusing very, very hard on not vomiting. Again.

He didn't bother to look up when he heard the doors *swoosh* open, not wanting to send his world spinning again when he already knew who it was.

"Twelve CCs of Aquafina, stat," Richie slurred, crouching down in front of Eddie and offering him the bottle of water he'd just bought. Eddie raised his head back up to reach for it, putting out his hand. He watched Richie unscrew the cap for him and press the cold bottle into his hand.

"Thanks," Eddie said, before taking several very small sips from the bottle.

"Least I can do, Eds," Richie said. "Since I'm pretty sure this is, uh, my fault." Eddie scoffed, regretting it when his stomach gave a little lurch.

"You didn't," Eddie started, "you didn't, like, *get* me drunk, that was all me." Richie grinned at him, and leaned forward to rest a hand on Eddie's shoulder.

"I did challenge you on those last couple shots, though," he said, leaning closer, like a secret. Eddie rolled his eyes, another dizzying mistake.

"Ugh," he said, "yeah, alright, it's your fault, you asshole." He shook Richie's hand off of him, sending Richie falling out of his crouch onto his ass on the sidewalk, laughing. They both took their time standing back up, aiming for no further tumbles and succeeding. Eddie leaned with his back against the side of the building as he watched Richie bend back over to grab Eddie's cane up from off the ground. He bowed towards Eddie to hand it back to him, and Eddie couldn't quite stifle a giggle as he accepted it (which would have been embarrassing, had anyone other than Richie been there to hear it). Richie straightened back up, still smiling at him and Eddie, as he'd grown accustomed to, couldn't help but smile back at him. They both

stood there, unmoving, just looking at each other like a pair of weirdos.

“This was fun,” Eddie said, feeling honest. Richie’s grin spread somehow further across his face and Eddie’s heart sputtered at it. Endearing, Eddie decided then and there, was the word for it. Endearing, always, and after all this time.

“Let me walk you home,” Richie blurted, and Eddie frowned at him.

“It’s fine,” he said. “I bet you’re fuckin’ exhausted, man, you can just go.”

“No,” Richie insisted, “I just—can I just? If your back hurts or, whatever I can—”

“It’s not that far, I’ll just call a ride or something. Don’t worry about me.” Eddie had barely finished his sentence before Richie barked out a laugh.

“Eddie, I worry about you every single day of my life,” he said. “‘Oh, don’t worry about me,’ like that’s not the dumbest shit I’ve ever heard. Like every single *second* you’re not in my direct line of sight I’m not terrified about what’s happening to you.”

“What? What the fuck, Rich?” Eddie looked up at him, at his skewed glasses and very real look of fear on his face. Richie looked as if he was going to step closer, but didn’t.

“God, shit. I saw you die, man. You know? It took me a fucking week to get your blood out from under my fingernails. I’m just— I’m just.” Richie ran his hands through his own hair, mussing it up more than its usual state of semi-combed disarray. “Just. If you really want me to just go, I will. I know you don’t need *protection* or anything but, *fuck*, dude, you know I— I almost lost you once this year. I don’t really wanna go around giving ‘fate’ or whatever another shot. I just got you back.”

Eddie looked at him. It didn’t make much sense, but there was a lot that Eddie forgot about almost dying. His memories of it were spotty at best (a hearty dose of blood loss and mental/emotional trauma will

do that) and he'd been almost thankful for it. There were bits and pieces still rattling around his head, sudden reminders popping up from time to time if he saw or heard something too similar to those moments in the cistern. The dripping of a faucet not fully turned off, the damp air in the pool at the gym, or the smell of sewage rising up out of the grates in the street because he lived in New York *fucking* City. These set him off, sometimes. Nothing too big, he hadn't had a meltdown or a freakout or anything. Just the tight grip of panic, clenching around (through?) his gut like a (claw?), like a (claw?), like a *fist*, holding tight and squeezing. And panic was nothing new to him, Eddie had been panicking his whole life. It may have been, he sometimes thought, the one thing he was truly good at. Seeing Richie panic like this was strange, turned around, backwards. He nodded at Richie.

"Yeah, alright, man," he said. "If it helps." He gestured with his head the direction in which to walk, and they both headed that way, stumbling.

"Sorry," Richie said, after a minute or two. "That was real fucking weird of me, I know you can take care of yourself. Like, shit, not to go all Mrs. K on you but—"

"No, I get it," he said. He kind of got it. "It's nice to have you here to, what? Guard me? If fate decides to swing back around and *Final Destination* me?" It was his turn, Eddie guessed, to try and lighten the mood because this had pretty quickly become not fun *at all*. It must have worked, because Richie chuckled (softly, but a chuckle all the same), and the sound of it eased a weight Eddie hadn't felt building on his shoulders.

"It's a real danger, Eds," Richie said, glancing at him. "Tony Todd could be lurking behind any corner. Destiny is some tricky shit. You gotta," he lowered his voice, "beware the risk of cheating the plan, disrespecting the design. You could initiate a horrible fury that would terrorize even the Grim Reaper. And you don't even want to fuck with that MacDaddy." Eddie laughed, grabbing at his stomach.

"That verbatim, Rich?"

"Eh, maybe."

“How many times have you seen that movie?”

“A, uh, handful.”

“Uh-huh. And why?”

“I, uh, I had kind of a thing for Devon Sawa.”

“Fucking *really* ?”

“And,” Richie raised his voice as he started to defend himself, “and it has some really sick death scenes, it’s like an invisible slasher. Like no one can even see it coming and...” He trailed off at this, shrugging. “Not sure it holds up though. Y’know.”

Eddie nodded and moved to gently bump his shoulder against Richie’s. They ended up ordering a ride after a few minutes, both of them exhausted. Richie still walked him into the lobby of his building. Eddie could almost think this felt like the end of a date, but he’d never had a date end like this. Richie must have been thinking something similar, and felt the need to joke about it.

“You the kind of boy to put out on the first date, Mr. Kaspbrak? I *did* walk you home, which is pretty goddamn gentlemanly of me, if I do say so myself,” he said, glossing over the real reason for his wanting to chaperone Eddie’s way back, and Eddie let him. “I’d say I wanna come up and meet your folks first, but, as you know, your mom and I are already well acquainted.” Eddie glared at him, but it was soft, more sleepy than anything.

“I know you know my mom’s dead, you dick,” he said, reaching forward to push at Richie’s chest and Richie, again, grinned at him. Endearing. Endearing was what it was, squeezing in his chest.

They said their goodbyes, and Richie had just about turned around to go when Eddie reached out, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him in for a hug.

“Goodnight,” Eddie said, when they pulled apart. “Text me when you get back to the hotel.” Richie nodded and, slower this time, turned to leave the building. Eddie watched him go before pressing the button on the elevator.

He'd asked her not to, but Myra had waited up for him anyway. She fretted about as he tried to get ready for bed, in his separate bedroom, bringing him a glass of water and laying out ibuprofen on the nightstand. He'd pointed out that he was already holding a bottle of water and that there was already ibuprofen inside the nightstand, but she'd done it anyway, compelled. The entire time she spent flitting around him, she was asking questions. Nothing interrogational, just general curiosity over his night. He wanted to scream. *It was fine, Myra! Yes, I had fun, Myra! I don't understand why you need to know this, Myra!* It had been his night out and it didn't need to be important to her, important to anyone but him.

Richie's "safe and sound at my bougie ass hotel" text arrived just as Eddie had finally managed to crawl into bed. He shot back a quick response and started to lie down, Myra still peeking in the doorway, asking if there was anything else he needed. He turned off the bedside lamp, he was fucking exhausted, mind still fuzzy from the alcohol and lightheaded from throwing up on the sidewalk.

"Okay," she said. "I'll be back in the morning to check on you, alright? Be sure to sleep on your side, just in case, honey, okay?" Eddie dutifully turned onto his side, too tired to do anything but just go with whatever was being said to him.

"Goodnight, Eddie-bear." Myra stepped back into the hallway, starting to pull the door closed

"Goodnight, Mommy." The door stopped closing. Eddie was suddenly very, very awake.

"Myra," he corrected. "Goodnight, Myra."

She shut the door.

Author's Note:

heya folks

this one is gonna be a little more slow-going, but it's like. half written and well on its way

title from hum by laura stevenson

(those with taste will stream the big freeze)